

# resurgence

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# Interview

## JOHN McKNIGHT

### University & Community

John McKnight is one of the few university professors who turn out neighbourhood activists rather than academics. At the North Western University of Chicago he is professor of urban affairs. In the biggest city of the United States he was able to start a number of projects which are examples for cities everywhere. To improve the health of the community they built rooftop greenhouses and to provide education they created a network of learners and teachers throughout the city. He visited Resurgence recently and talked about the relationship between the university and the community.

**R**esurgence: Most universities seem to confine themselves to the academic world but you talk of moving out of it.

**McKnight:** When I say universities I mean large American universities like the university of Wisconsin, the North Western University where I am, the University of California, Columbia or Harvard. These universities are engaged in research and training of people to manage large scale corporations, large school systems, large medical centres, large governments. These universities are preparing people to live at the top of the pyramid of power. When you talk to the professors they will tell you that because they are removed from the main stream, they can be objective, they can search for the truth. But when you look carefully you can see that in fact they are not objective. They are the handmaids of the macro-institutions of our society. If you have any doubt look at their research, you will see that local communities do not exist for the universities.

**Resurgence:** But the professors will say that they work through the macro world of large governments and large corporations to benefit local communities. The function of a university is not to serve the local communities but to influence the policy makers.

**McKnight:** In the United States they don't say that they are trying to direct policies to support local communities. The United States is predicated upon individualism. So, they would say more that they are supporting policies that will maximise the development of the individual, not communities. It is an important distinction. Most policy people in universities are not concerned with communities. They are concerned with only two parts of the landscape: the monumental institutions on the one hand and miniscule individuals on the other. They pay no attention to communities or neighbourhoods.

**Resurgence:** How did your Centre For Urban Affairs at the North Western University develop this idea of working in the neighbourhood?

**McKnight:** I and some others had worked in and with communities most of our lives. When our university established an urban research centre, instead of just choosing academics, they asked two or three of us from outside to come in and become professors. I have no Ph.D., no advanced education. We decided to give it a try. I doubt very much that you can take a group of people who are pure academics and make them very useful to primary community life. Therefore they need to have somebody with them who always turns their heads away from large institutions and centres of power and turns them towards community.

**Resurgence:** Can you tell us more about your neighbourhood work?

**McKnight:** Well, the University I am in is in Chicago, the biggest city in the United States. Here if you are concerned about communities you have to be concerned about the city. If we were in a rural area we would have been concerned about a rural area. We are concerned especially about those people who have the least power, that means the people who are poor, minority peoples, latinos and blacks. Those of us who came from the outside came from those neighbourhoods. We have a theory that all institutions must serve communities or they are illegitimate. In fact in modern countries like Britain and the United States this has become inverted. People say that it is the job of the communities to prepare their members to serve the institutions. If you are not ready to serve in one of these huge institutions the community has failed in its purpose. This is the modern lie. It is a lie so large that it is now for most people the truth. We operate on the opposite premise, that the centre of the society is the community. That institutions can only be legitimate if they strengthen and serve communities rather than dominate and distort them. In that sense we see ourselves as part of a struggle to push back the institutions, and to give more room for the communities.



Photo: Steven Wilby

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We have to invent a way to make the university useful so that it does not become a slave of the institutional spectre.



**Resurgence:** How do you put this theory into reality?

**McKnight:** When I first went to university I thought that in the university there would be much that the community could use but, I found, that was not true. A community is a small group and the university is used to dealing with large institutions. We had to invent a way, to make the university and professors useful. That is one of our missions to help academics to be useful if they don't want to be slaves of the institutional spectre.

I'll give you an example. East Garfield Park was a white neighbourhood that over a period changed to a black neighbourhood. In this community when the people were all black many institutions remained white. They served the white who had moved out but came back to be served. Two hospitals in the area were like this. So the black people formed a neighbourhood association and put pressure on the hospitals so that they would serve the black people of the neighbourhood. This was effective after two years. The hospital began hiring black people and serving black people. Later the neighbourhood association had a meeting which I attended. After there had been considerable discussion about how the hospital was now serving the community an old lady stood up and said "I don't see how this helped us". Everybody was surprised. She said "I remember how many of us were sick before. Now people are just as sick, things have not improved".

They began to discuss why that was. Was it true first of all and why? They all agreed that their health hadn't improved even though they had two nice hospitals in the community. So they turned to me from the university and asked, "why has that happened?" I said, "I don't know. Why don't we find out?"

Now, here is something that the university can be helpful with. Because the community is not so well acquainted with how things work in this kind of institution. They thought that it must be that the hospitals are poor hospitals if they were still sick. So, we got some graduate students in sociology, economics, political science. They went into the library of the hospital and they began to take a sample of the medical records, looking at every tenth one and writing down what the record told us about the person who went into the hospital.

If you want to work with communities you have to be prepared to do humble work. You are not designing an atomic generator, important work that kills people, you are doing simple work that allows people to live. There is a very close relationship between the simplicity of the work and life. Most death dealing is complicated.

Our research showed that the largest number of people in the hospital were



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not there because of tuberculosis, cancer or smallpox. They were there because of traffic accidents. The second most frequent reason was because of falls, third because of assault: people being hit, shot or knifed, fourth reason: alcohol, fifth reason: drugs, sixth reason: bronchial problems, seventh reason: dog bites. We took this information back to the community. When they looked at the list they were very surprised, because that list was a list of problems, not diseases. In other words, you can't go to a doctor and get an inoculation against an automobile accident but that is the most hazardous thing in the community. You can't get a pill from the doctor for a fall down a slum building stairs because the landlord didn't fix it up. The doctor can't even give a prescription or an order to the landlord to fix the building. So the information made clear to them that the problem wasn't in the hospital, the problem was in the community. They understood that the health problem was their domain and they had mistakenly given it over to the medical institution. Because no matter how many times they sew up a person in an automobile accident it has no effect on automobile accidents.

We have great medical institutions in Chicago which can never improve health because the number one killer of people between the ages of 16 and 45 is automobiles. So, now they had a list of the real health problems and it put responsibility back on them, not on the hospitals. They had to do something about it. When our health is placed back in our hands, all of a sudden, we will see how weak we are, because we don't have the tools, experience, skills, knowledge and political power. Where are all those? They are all in the large institutions. That is why moving towards community empowerment is a struggle about power. You cannot have powerful institutions and at the same time strong communities. You have to take power from the institutions as the communities grow in responsibility.

**Resurgence:** And you need to take some of their money.

**McKnight:** In this neighbourhood we did a study that indicated that for every dollar in cash that the persons got just to buy food and survive, 50c was paid to the health service for their care. In a sense half of their income was given to medicine. If I went to the health service and said: "Tell me what would happen to the health of the people in this neighbourhood if I raised their income 50%?" They would say: "Within ten years their health would jump way up." I would say, "But you have the 50%. You have it. You are making them sick." This is iatrogenic. At the policy level the hospital is a sick making institution. It helps impoverish the poor. It is parasitic. Now parasites can be alright. Mistletoe is a parasite on the oak tree but the mistletoe is a little plant, the oak tree is big and strong.

But when you see a parasite like medical systems on poor people, that is terrible. Because the parasite is the oak tree and the community is the miseltoe.

**Resurgence:** Did you do anything to help the community to take health in their own hands?

**McKnight:** Yes. The community asked us why people were suffering from bronchial problems, coughs, colds and flu. We said we don't know but we will go and find out. We are in the middle of a network, that is a good thing about a university. In our network was our medical school. So we talked to people there. We were told that the most common reason for bronchial problems is because in cities poor people do not have the right food and the condition of their body is so low that they can't resist germs. So, we had people from the medical school come and meet with the community and talk about nutrition. People said, "the main thing that we don't have is fresh fruit and vegetables. They cost too much and we can't grow them for there is no place to grow things." At that point they began to talk about how they could grow their own fresh fruit and vegetables. This is a slum neighbourhood, the houses are jammed together with very little ground. Then one of the people said, "well you know most of the apartment buildings have a flat roof. Maybe we can grow things up on top. Can we do that?" They turned to me. I said, "I don't know but we will find out."

So, we went to the library and got in touch with the appropriate technology network. They said you could probably do it. You have to take earth up there but it would blow away and in the winter it wouldn't be warm, so, you would need a greenhouse. We began to explore with the neighbourhood how the greenhouses could be built and how much the materials would cost. They decided to experiment and they built a green house on top of one of the apartment buildings and began to grow things. Then some interesting things began to happen. First, they got food which was fresh. That was helpful. They also grew more food than the person whose house it was on could eat. So, that person could sell it in the community. This helped to build the neighbourhood economy, so it was economic development. The roofs were the major places where the buildings lost their heat, this had made the buildings very inefficient and expensive. Now with the greenhouse on top of the roof the heat which had been wasted was used to warm the greenhouse so that in winter you could grow the fruit and vegetables. Nearby there was an old people's home. They found out about the greenhouses and asked if they could come up and work in them. Many of them had been raised in rural agricultural areas. Now they could grow things and be around plants. This brought a whole new life to these old

people. The man who managed the nursing home, said to me. "This is unbelievable. It has changed the very nature of how these people feel about life". Then a youth worker, who was dealing with juvenile delinquents, brought some of these boys up and taught them how to work in the greenhouse and they too began to think differently. They became more responsible to each other and to the community because of their responsibilities for something natural. The food, economic development, energy conservation, bringing old people back to life and bringing young people back to the community. All of these things happened from the greenhouse. Now that is a magnificent tool. But if you go to a university they can't help you with a greenhouse. Because they will say it is too simple. If you want to build a huge geodesic dome, which will put a city under glass, they will put their minds to it.

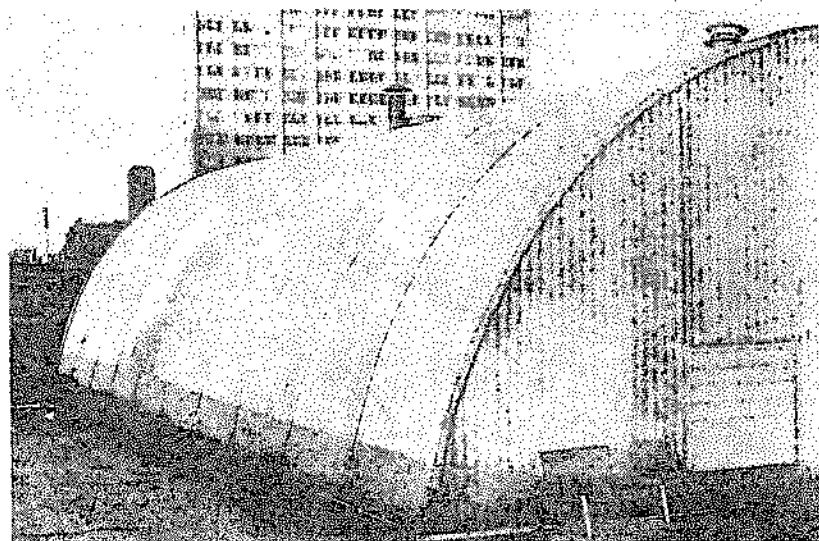
Most neighbourhoods are not in touch with people who have telephones, who can call around the country to libraries and methods of knowing what is happening. So, we were able to find out about greenhouses and information that would start them on the way they wanted to go. We also spent some time evaluating these things. Seeing how they work, why they work, so we could explain to other people if they wanted to do these things.

**Resurgence:** How were these greenhouses financed?

**McKnight:** The neighbourhood organisation has money from a trust, which it used to finance the first greenhouse. As the greenhouses developed they financed each other. You can make enough money off one greenhouse to build another. So you just need seed money to get going.

**Resurgence:** You also started a learning exchange. How did that come about?

**McKnight:** This came from within the university. We had a couple of young people who were graduate students in education. They became convinced that none of the so called reforms of big schools were working. Therefore they were wasting their lives getting Ph.D's in educational administration for big schools. So they came over to our centre where they heard that we were trying to think about communities rather than institutions. One of them said to me, "educational administration is hopeless. I'm going to drop out." So I said to him, "I have a friend who is having a seminar on education in Mexico." So he said, "that sounds interesting" and he went down to Cuernavaca where I was then was directing CIDOC. The people who were gathered there conceived this idea of learning exchange: a place where people who wanted to teach could deposit their names and people who wanted to learn could find the names of people who could teach. When he came back I lent him twenty dollars and we produced several thousand leaflets and went around the community and stuck them in mail boxes saying to people: "We are starting a learning exchange. If you know anything that you could teach call and tell us." More and more people came forward. We built up to about 20,000 subjects that people could teach and over the years we have had thousands and thousands of people who use it. We wanted it to become economically self sustaining so, we asked people to pay an annual membership, not much but enough for the expenses. This is a very simple device unlike a school. It has 20,000 teachers but when you look at it, it is a small office in a church attic. It has one, sometimes two people in the office and it has 3 telephones. People call in and say "I would like to learn about weaving," and you look in the card file and you see you have three teachers who can teach weaving. You can call them and see whether they want to be paid or not, where and when they can





do it and whether it is the kind of weaving you want. We make a big point that we don't certify any of these teachers. Certification is the way teachers protect themselves from having to know anything. If you ask "which one is the best?" I say, "Why don't you go and look at their weaving, and talk to their students? Then you will really know." If I gave a certificate you would depend on me and I would give a certificate to anyone who went to my weaving school, because I have a vested interest. Some of the graduates from my school will be great weavers, many of them will be average, some of them will be terrible, but they will all have my certificate. You may end up with a terrible weaving teacher but you can't resist because on the wall the weaving teacher has a gold seal and a certificate from my school. I give you a great opportunity unlike the school: I give you three people who say they can weave and you go and find out if they can. We have had only one complaint in ten years.

The learning exchange tends to be used by younger people. I think older people have been so schooled that they don't think that they could learn outside of a school. Or maybe schools made people so sick of what was called learning that they don't want to do it any more. It is used especially for learning skills, music, language, crafts, arts, etc.

**Resurgence:** Why do teachers in these areas come especially to you and why are students looking for these subjects?

**McKnight:** I think it is because schools are least effective when you are learning how to do something with your hands. There is no substitute for an apprentice like relationship. Therefore our learning exchange is in part an apprentice/master bank. It also operates in many other areas. There are people who are interested in teaching Greek philosophy. A person using the learning exchange could in the same amount of

time as a student at high school become a 100 times better educated and for half the price.

**Resurgence:** Do you have any practical way of going about empowering the neighbourhoods, politically?

**McKnight:** We are just beginning there. In American cities central government has all the local power and communities have none. What has happened in the last 40 years is that more and more powers have gone from the cities to the state and from the state to the federal government. So we are beginning to develop a network of people who are going to lobby, to develop research, argument, advocacy for dispersing authority from the central government to the local neighbourhoods.

**Resurgence:** What areas do you want to see neighbourhood governments in charge of? Taxation?

**McKnight:** Yes. The neighbourhood ought to be able to decide what will be done with at least a part of the taxes that come from the neighbourhood. At present all the taxes from the neighbourhood go to the central authority which then decides what will be done with it for or to the neighbourhood. In poor neighbourhoods there is a second issue. Taxation redistributes income so that poor neighbourhoods have extra money coming to them. But it comes in programmes: health programmes, social service programmes, child programmes, all sorts of programmes. We would like to have that money come to the poor neighbourhoods as money, not as programmes, so that the people can decide how they will develop their own community. That money could be used as investment for enterprises that would begin to build an economy that would free them from dependence on services provided by the government.

In other words, the institutional servants, who are helping the poor, are really taking investment capital away from the people and using it for themselves. We say, "Don't help them. Just give us your salary and we will invest it in greenhouses or something. We will be infinitely better off than with your medical service or social service."

**Resurgence:** What about legal power?

**McKnight:** That is more difficult. But I would like to see local communities having power to decide what shall be a violation of law in the criminal sense and what shall be the penalty. We know in our big cities that our criminal laws are an absolute failure. We are sending large numbers of young men, mostly black, away to prison where their experience is hideous and they come out angry, bitter and better trained in the ways of crime. They are then a literal menace. We have made them criminals. One way to break that is to put the authority at a local level, for people to define what is allowed and what isn't. And to have community people involved in what I call adjudication. And here I can go a little further, I think the most anti-revolutionary power is the power to exile. That is, if you have a community which has a bad social order, which produces lots of people who are mentally ill, who are physically unhealthy, whose children are delinquent, or criminal and you send all of those people outside to be institutionalised, in hospitals, prisons, reformatories, then you have made it possible for the community to continue to have a bad social order. The message of this exile is: we are O.K. but those people whom we send out are bad. And the social service professional is the key person in this anti-revolutionary system. Social services encourage this exile. They say: you exile them and we will take care of them. I would like to draw a boundary around the community, and say: when your children commit crimes you can do anything you want, except send them out. When people become mentally ill you can't send them away, you have to look after them. You will then assume the therapeutic role which the professional now performs. Maybe you will be forced to do what you should have done in the first place. You will think. I have so many juvenile delinquents I can't take care of them, I must figure out why we have so many juvenile delinquents. And you know what we will find out? we the community make them. So to deal with our problem, we will have to change the community. That is where true revolution starts. ●



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